

Remarks Honoring the 2015 National Teacher of the Year and State Teachers of the Year

April 29, 2015

Welcome to the White House, everybody. Please have a seat. This is one of my favorite days because it gives us a chance to acknowledge some folks who so often are giving so much and, let's face it, aren't always getting a lot in return. *[Laughter]* Every day, the teachers behind me, they give their students their all: their knowledge, their creativity, their focused attention, their love. They empty the tanks for their kids. Then, they get up the next morning, and they do it all over again.

And today is our chance to say thank you, to let these educators know that we see how hard they work, we know the difference they make in their students' lives. And they are, at the same time, making an incredible difference in the life of our country. Today is a chance to reaffirm how important teachers are to our Nation, not just these teachers, but all teachers.

And we are joined by somebody who is as passionate about our teachers and our students as anybody I know, and that is our outstanding Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. I want to thank all the school leaders who are here today, because it takes leadership at every level, from principal all the way up to superintendent, to give our students the best chance to succeed.

Because of teachers like these, our classrooms are full of future doctors learning how muscle groups and organs work and future poets discovering Langston Hughes and Emily Dickinson, future scientists who are tinkering with microscopes and circuit boards. Future entrepreneurs are getting the hang of collaboration and problem-solving. Future leaders are learning what it means to be a citizen and how the ideals of freedom and justice made our country what we are today.

So America's future is written in our classrooms. We all depend on our teachers, whether we have kids in the schools or not. They deserve our support and our appreciation. And they also probably deserve higher salaries. *[Laughter]* I thought I'd editorialize a little bit. *[Laughter]* Ad lib. That's what today is all about.

Here with us are 55 of America's top teachers, from as far away as Alaska and American Samoa, and as close as Maryland and Washington, DC. They teach everything from math and science to art and journalism. Some have taught for decades; others are still pretty new. A few of them look like they're still in middle school. *[Laughter]* But all of them share a passion for helping their kids develop their talents. All of them know the thrill of introducing students to something new and exciting. All of them are really, really, really good at their jobs.

I wish I could talk about each and every one of them, because all of you are remarkable. But in the interest of time, I'll just say a few words about one teacher in particular who happens to be the 2015 National Teacher of the Year: from Amarillo, Texas, Shanna Peebles.

So, Shanna, I'm going to brag on you a little bit. *[Laughter]* You just stand there and relax for a second. *[Laughter]* So Shanna teaches English at Palo Duro High School in Amarillo. Many of her students face challenges that would overwhelm adults, let alone kids. About 85 percent are considered economically disadvantaged. Many are refugees from places like Iraq and Somalia. Many of them have known trauma and violence in their lives and borne burdens that no kid should have to bear. Sometimes, just showing up to school is hard. But Shanna's

classroom provides them a safe haven. And in Shanna, they find somebody who protects them fiercely and believes in them deeply and sets high expectations and is confident that they're going to do amazing things.

Now, according to Shanna, she wasn't always a teacher. In fact, she tried everything else she could before she finally accepted her destiny. She was a DJ. *[Laughter]* I want to hear more about that. *[Laughter]* She was a medical assistant. She was a journalist; a professional pet sitter. *[Laughter]* Finally, she realized what she was always meant to do, and that's helping young people discover the joy and power of words.

As somebody who grew up in a violent home, writing and books meant everything to Shanna. They were an escape and a comfort, a never-ending source of inspiration, a way to provide meaning to life at difficult times. One special teacher, she says, Ms. Belton, helped Shanna develop her passion. As Shanna puts it, "She taught me that it was possible to read and write my way into another life." That's a pretty good description of education in general.

Today, Ms. Peebles passes that same lesson on to her teachers—on to her students. In their writing circles, students pour their personal stories onto the page. And she tells them, "Everyone has a voice, everyone has a story worth sharing." They discover that their experiences aren't so singular, that whether they're an Ethiopian refugee or they've never set foot out of Texas, they're not so different, and they're not so alone, as a consequence.

Shanna works hard to earn and keep their trust and help them find new ways to grow—academically and emotionally—to rise above their present and to reach for their future. "In a sense, I sell hope," she says. I love that line. *[Laughter]* "In a sense, I sell hope." And her students are hungry for hope. Most kids are hungry for hope. Since Shanna arrived at Palo Duro 5 years ago, the number of kids taking the AP English III exam has doubled. This year, 30 students are taking the AP English IV exam. Before Shanna arrived, the number was exactly zero.

Shanna's impact reaches beyond her classroom as well. Her English-as-a-second-language students write bilingual books for kids and record lessons that refugee families can access online. Her AP students hit the streets of Amarillo on public health campaigns, conduct social science research on the health benefits of gratitude. I love that too. *[Laughter]* As her school's instructional coach and as a literacy trainer for the district, Shanna helps other teachers learn how to better teach reading and writing. For some of her colleagues, she's a godsend. Her principal says, "One teacher told me he was sinking until Shanna came to his rescue."

She often uses the tale of Hansel and Gretel to finish the school year. It's a story, she says, of how we can be our own heroes, find our way out of the forest. Shanna's students have gone on to the Ivy League. They've won prestigious scholarships. But more importantly, many have just found their way out of the forest into new and better chapters of their lives. They've figured out a way to carve a path for themselves, in large part because of her.

Now, obviously, Shanna is exceptional, but we could have told a similar story about every single one of the teachers standing here behind me. They are not just teaching formulas or phonetics. They're selling hope, sparking imagination, opening up minds, giving people— young people—a sense of their own power. They teach students to challenge themselves and dream beyond their circumstances and imagine different futures. And then, they work as hard as they can to help those young people make their dreams real.

So at the end of the school year, their children aren't just smarter, they're stronger and more confident and more resilient and more inspired. And maybe, if they've tripped, they've

been able to get up and dust themselves off. And that's going to make them that much better in the future because they'll probably trip a little more.

Those qualities are hard to measure, but they are invaluable. America is hungry for more teachers like these, which is why we've got to acknowledge them, because every school has teachers like these, and we don't give them enough credit. And we don't talk about it enough.

So I want to thank all the teachers who are here today for your outstanding contributions to the life of our Nation. We couldn't be prouder of you. I like the fact that we have a strong contingent of men here today too, by the way. *[Laughter]* I like that. Way to go, guys. *[Laughter]*

And with that, I want to present Shanna with her crystal apple.

[At this point, the President handed the National Teacher of the Year award to Shanna Peeples.]

Here we go. Let's get a good picture of that. There you go. All right.

Fantastic. And with that, let me present the Teacher of the Year, Shanna Peeples.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sandy Whitlow, principal, Palo Duro High School in Amarillo, TX.

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